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ABSTRACT

This bulletin discusses approaches that reformers are using nationwide to bring about improvement in urban schools. It focuses on (1) embracing more choices (school vouchers, charter schools, private management, public school transfers, home schooling, enrolling high school students in community colleges, and virtual education); (2) holding schools and students accountable and insisting on results (using regular testing, eliminating social promotion, adopting proven school designs, reforming special education, instituting year-round schooling, expanding preschool education, and improving the teacher certification process); and (3) staying the course (working with an alliance of businesses, community leaders, and reform politicians dedicated to choice and accountability reforms in order to ensure success). (SM)

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This Works: Improving Urban Education

Jay P. Greene

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Introduction

There is probably no public policy issue in America today that is more important, or more daunting, than the need to improve urban education. Despite an overwhelming national consensus on the value of a good education, both to individual children and to communities as a whole, the appalling performance of urban school systems has proved remarkably resistant to change. While cities throughout the country experienced a renaissance during the 1990's, making vast strides in everything from preventing crime to reducing the welfare rolls, their progress in educating their children was notably limited. To meet this challenge, urban leaders will need to embrace innovative measures to improving their school systems.

There are two key concepts that lie behind practically every successful attempt at education reform: Choice and Accountability. Giving parents and students real educational options to choose from injects competition into the public school system, forcing it to improve and adapt, while at the same time providing greater opportunities for those students who are currently being ill-served. Making schools accountable for their performance, by setting strict standards, tracking their success in meeting them, and mandating consequences for not doing so both establishes firm incentives for improvement and makes it impossible to sweep failure under the rug. Basing their efforts on these ideas, reformers around the country, of all political persuasions, have had significant successes in bringing about positive change through a wide variety of approaches. Taken together, and adapted to local circumstances, these specific measures and the principles of competition and accountability that generated them represent a blueprint for success in reversing the decline of America's urban schools.

Embracing More Choices

With every year, the evidence mounts that more options in the school system benefits all students, both those in the traditional public school system or those taking advantage of the increased choices provided. Competition encourages the public schools to innovate, reform, and be responsive to students and their families as well as offering an outlet for students that are not getting what they need out of the public system. A focus on competition also stimulates new approaches to education, with potentially dramatic benefits, that are stifled by the monopoly of a single form of public education. While the principle of school choice can be, and has been, applied in numerous ways, the essential goal is the same: to offer the best possible set of options to all students,

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regardless of their socioeconomic status or the happenstance of where they reside. Each of the following education reform approaches is based on that goal.

Offer School Vouchers

Publicly funded voucher programs can make a major difference in improving urban education. Such programs give children who are failing under the public school system an opportunity to improve their situation, while the program as a whole forces the public schools to raise their own performance in order to retain their students. As a result of this competition, not only do failing students do better but so do failing schools, and even failing school systems as a whole. Voucher programs have been effectively applied to entire urban school systems, notably in Milwaukee, where all children are eligible for vouchers good at public, private and parochial schools, and specifically targeted at failing schools, most successfully with the State of Florida's A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program. The latter in particular shows how blending both key themes of education reform can gain dramatic results.

While the principle of school choice can be, and has been, applied in numerous ways, the essential goal is the same: to offer the best possible set of options to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or the happenstance of where they reside.

The most significant difficulty with a reform approach based on vouchers is their continuing political barriers and ongoing legal challenges, though the upholding of the Cleveland voucher program in the Supreme Court this year was an encouraging sign for the latter issue. If a full-scale voucher program is not a possibility for these reasons, however, smaller more targeted vouchers may still make a significant difference. One proposal, part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, is to provide vouchers for private tutoring to students in failing schools. Another sound idea is narrowly targeted vouchers for unique problems, such as Florida's McKay Scholarships program, which provides vouchers to families of children in special education programs. Such plans as these, by limiting the legal issues and political objections, may be more easily implemented, at least in the short term, than broader voucher programs.

Support Charter Schools

Another way to facilitate competition through expanded choices is the creation of charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of local school districts. The organizational autonomy of the charter school structure provides far more room for innovation, and greater flexibility in meeting student needs, than traditional public schools enjoy. Such schools can not only provide an enhanced education for the individual students they serve, who tend to be the more disadvantaged ones, but also help improve the system as a whole, both by providing needed competition and by testing out new approaches that, if successful, can be more widely implemented.

In order to live up to their potential to significantly improve urban education, charter schools must be established under certain basic guidelines. They must be given the autonomy they require to be creative, immune from traditional constraints on pedagogy or employment. The recent decision by the Education Department supporting the legality of public single-sex education is an example of a step that will increase charter flexibility. At the same time, charter schools must be held tightly accountable for their results, supplementing the natural accountability effects of market competition, to ensure that unsuccessful innovations do not become entrenched. Finally, charter

schools, which are chronically underfunded, need both financial and communal support. Government support is crucial, but corporate or philanthropic funding and local community involvement are also important. In supportive environments of this type, particularly in cities such as Boston, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., charters have made a large impact.

Employ Private Management

Turning failing schools or even whole districts over to private management can offer some of the same advantages of the charter school approach. Whether operated for profit or not, private managers can, if their contract is appropriately structured, have greater flexibility, and are less wedded to entrenched educational methods. Some for-profit groups, such as Edison Schools, are also willing to make major initial investments, in expectation of long-term returns, that simply aren't feasible for regular public schools. Turning over failing schools to private control, or even merely threatening to do so, can also stimulate improvement by school administrations and faculties in danger of being replaced.

The effectiveness of out-sourcing school management, however, depends greatly on the conditions under which it is undertaken. Various for- and non-profit groups are engaging in education management, and not all of them will be sufficiently competent to improve the schools they seek to run. Moreover, even the most effective management group is hostage to its contract; if they cannot replace existing staff, or change the basic pedagogical approach, then little can be done regardless of the management. And contracts, even when they can be obtained over significant political opposition, are often compromises of just that sort. These basic difficulties are reflected in the mixed results of private management to date. The experience of Philadelphia, which decided this year to out-source management of 45 of its schools, and 30,000 students, to a variety of private groups, will soon provide key lessons into how to pursue this approach properly.

Allow Public School Transfers

It is possible to inject a certain amount of competition and responsiveness into urban education without shifting students to entirely new entities. Allowing choice in the form of public school transfers can accomplish some of these goals. While vouchers and charters have generally proved more effective, letting students move from failing schools to others in the public system does create both greater incentives for schools to improve and a way out for children trapped in a school that isn't educating.

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Intra-district transfers, though certainly helpful, have only a moderate effect. While they can cause some improvement, they are essentially a matter of different flavors in a single store; if the problem is with the store, trying a different flavor doesn't help. Inter-district transfers, where students can leave an entire school district if their school is failing, are more promising, though the idea hasn't yet had a real test run. Transfer programs, most notably to allow urban children to attend suburban schools, have been gutted due to political opposition by the better off systems. This has proved the case most notably in the urban-to-suburban programs in Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cleveland. A new program in Michigan, where students in failing districts can transfer to any contiguous district, is a more promising example of the potential gains that can be made.

Ease Restrictions on Home-schooling

Easing restrictions on parents who wish to home school their children, and providing support to those who choose to, is another way to increase the amount of choice in the system. While home-schooling currently serves a small percentage of students (Oregon has the nation's highest home-schooling rate at 2% of students), it can be extremely useful in those cases where the children involved are a poor fit for the available school options. As long as reasonable standards are set that allow competent parents to remove their children from failing schools into their home, this can provide an outlet and a source of healthy competition. Increasing resources aimed at helping parents home school, produced by organizations like William Bennett's K12, are making home-schooling a more and more viable educational alternative.

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Encourage Community Colleges to Enroll High School Students

One rarely recognized source of potential improvement in urban education are the nation's community colleges. Two-year colleges could certainly provide courses for motivated urban high school students. On the whole, such colleges perform better with fewer resources than lower levels of the public education system. Shifting students and resources towards them when the high schools are failing would likely have positive results. This is especially true in regards to technical colleges, which can supply a high-caliber vocational education to high school students not interested in pursuing a full college degree. "Tech Prep" programs of this kind have achieved success from New York to California, and could be expanded to good effect.

It is clear that there are important educational gaps that community colleges are well positioned to fill, perhaps the most obvious being the current lack of Advanced Placement courses or their equivalents offered in urban high schools, particularly those serving lower-income and minority students. As long as firm accountability testing is in place, students would certainly be no worse off with interested community colleges than with their present high schools. Such programs would create competition between different layers of public education, causing both to improve. They might also have the side benefit of allowing the colleges to better tailor any remedial programs for their incoming college students, as well as reducing the need for such programs by preparing potential applicants in their high school role.

Invest in Virtual Education

The concept with the greatest potential to change the face of urban education over the next decades is the application of Internet and other cyber-technologies to education. These innovations are not only fueling the aforementioned increase in home-schooling, they are becoming more and more capable of improving the traditional classroom experience in powerful ways. In the long term, virtual education may transcend it altogether. By empowering children to be taught at their own desk with the aid of a computer and an Internet link or advanced software, virtual education blurs the line between individual learning and traditional schooling.

Perhaps the most obvious change virtual education will make possible is that school will no longer necessarily require a central physical location. A class of children could conceivably be formed simply by each child logging onto a computer at their own choice of location, whether at home, a day care center, or a parent's office. Not only would this approach plausibly reduce

many of the basic costs of traditional public schools, it would also reduce the problems of differing qualities of teachers, classmates, and even schools by rendering them all subordinate to either a single distant, and excellent, set of educators brought to the students virtually, and by allowing students to find their classmates and educational style among all users and providers of the virtual education, rather than those that happen to be in the square mile around them.

Virtual education in the full sense is not a reality yet, and its promise remains only that: a promise. The experience of groups like K12 Inc., and a variety of virtual charter schools around the country, notably in Pennsylvania, shows that cyber-education resources can provide an innovative, top-notch education where traditional methods sometimes fail. At the very least, experimenting now with the use of virtual education will provide cities with a road map and infrastructure to use as the technology develops, essential tools if they are to take full advantage of the opportunity it may provide to rejuvenate urban education.

Insisting on Results

Allowing parents and children to choose from a multitude of different educational options, and encouraging the creation of ever more new and innovative options, will always have a positive influence on urban education. At least an equal impact can be made, however, by holding both schools and students accountable for their performance. If there are few incentives for success and no penalties for failure, then even the best school or program can fall prey to complacency or hopelessness. In systems where progress and performance are not even measured, schools and students often don't even know when they are doing things right or wrong. Only by combating this trend, by letting schools know where they stand, pointing out models for success, raising expectations and making changes in cases of failure, can urban education truly move forward. Setting standards, collecting data on how those standards are being met, and ensuring that there are significant consequences for failure can bring about as much of an improvement in education as can increasing school choice.

Use Regular Testing

An essential element of any school reform is the regular use of tests to gauge student performance and improvement. Testing gives an objective judgment of what students actually learn in the school system and allows both students' and schools' progress to be tracked. Only with this kind of vital data is it possible to determine where the problems are in the system, how schools stack up compared to one another, and whom they should look to for a model. Moreover, only the objective results created by testing provide consistent goals for schools that aren't immediately open to subversion.

Setting standards, collecting data on how those standards are being met, and ensuring that there are significant consequences for failure can bring about as much of an improvement in education as can increasing school choice.

While the No Child Left Behind Act mandates that a sampling of 4th and 8th grade students in each state take the National Assessment of Educational Progress in math and English, this is obviously insufficient for these purposes. Annual testing in all subjects would be ideal, and the tests should be uniform at least across each school district, so that schools can be profitably compared. This kind of regular testing allows for another, extremely valuable tool: "value-added" analysis. Such analysis compares student's test scores after each year, and charts the improvements generated that year. Such analysis determines not only how a school is doing in absolute terms, which

may be a function of a variety of factors, but also how it performs in terms of improvement from the past. This can be applied in individual subjects, to individual teachers, and to different teaching methods. Essentially, it means reformers can develop a better picture of what helps students in different types of circumstance.

Only by holding students accountable for their failures and insisting on their meeting basic minimum standards to advance and ultimately graduate can schools ensure that their students are ready when they do so. Such a policy also forces schools to be honest about what their students are really learning, the first step in improving the education they provide.

Eliminate Social Promotion

Closely related to the testing issue is the need to end social promotion. By moving children up through the grades irrespective of their actual knowledge, schools not only make it difficult to judge their success in educating them, but also leave the students totally unprepared when they are finally called upon to perform in college or the job market. Only by holding students accountable for their failures and insisting on their meeting basic minimum standards to advance and ultimately graduate can schools ensure that their students are ready when they do so. Such a policy also forces schools to be honest about what their students are really learning, the first step in improving the education they provide. Providing clear, objective requirements for advancement to the next grade level, or for graduation, and holding all students to those requirements is the only way schools can truly serve their students.

Adopt Proven School Designs

One of the obvious difficulties in effectively reforming urban education is replicating the success of others. Reinventing the wheel for every individual school wastes time and resources, as well as leaving the outcome in considerable doubt. One approach to reform that avoids these problems is to use school designs that have worked in the past. Both for- and non-profit organizations around the country produce specific "school models" with everything mapped out from facilities to curriculum, which can either be used to create a school from scratch, or tailored to an existing school or district.

Groups like New American Schools and designs like Core Knowledge can certainly be useful and have been used across the country. It is important to note, however, that not all designs are effective, and any selection process must be rigorous. Also important is how the design is implemented. Even the best design will fail if it is altered improperly or put into place without any underlying changes to the personnel or their basic philosophies. Still, by pushing for schools to adopt proven designs in an effective manner, real progress can be made.

Reform Special Education

Special education is a crucial aspect of urban education today. Throughout America, 12% of all students are touched in some way by the special ed system. Most of the time, that touch isn't a good one. Efforts to ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's myriad rules and procedures have caused a one-size-fits-all mentality that neglects student performance. Schools are so worried about being sued that educators focus on procedures rather than on student needs. Improving special education would be a hugely positive step in addressing the needs of urban children overall.

As mentioned above, vouchers for special ed students who are being failed by the public system will help address this problem. What is even more important, however, is that reformers, both in

Washington as the IDEA is renewed and on the local level, insist that special education focus on academic performance rather than regulatory compliance as a measure of success. They must also stress prevention of reading problems and early intervention to help millions of children by spotting their needs when they are young and then using proven methods to help them. Making academic performance the standard, trying to solve problems early, and holding special ed programs, either public or private, accountable, are the steps that could make a meaningful difference for the students facing a dysfunctional special education structure. These changes must take place primarily within the federal government. However, efforts to lobby Washington for change, to hold special education programs accountable for their performance, and to provide alternate opportunities like vouchers for students being failed by the system are all necessary at the state and local levels.

Institute Year-Round Schooling

One possible method of rejuvenating failing urban school districts is a move to eliminating summer vacation. The expansion in total learning time would naturally produce an increase in the amount students learn over the course of the year. This would also address the significant problem of a lack of knowledge retention. Students, and urban children even more so than their non-urban peers, tend to suffer from extremely low levels of retention over the summer months. Due to that loss of knowledge over the summer, urban children, especially the most needy with the fewest sources of enrichment outside of school, receive what is functionally remedial education for a good part of each year. Extending the school year could solve that problem, allowing students to progress faster and retain more.

While the costs of this kind of policy change may be high, they must be seen in the context of current summer school costs. Summer school, though usually expensive in itself, is generally a failure due to its ad hoc, non-integrated nature. Year-round schooling would be a far more effective use of the resources. For examples of year-round schooling, one only has to look to other industrialized nations in Europe and Japan, whose students tend to score higher that Americans in math and science. In the U.S., several charter schools have adopted year-round schooling. These kinds of small experiments on the charter level might be an initial way to proceed on year-round schooling.

Getting education to children at an early age is likely to cause major improvements in their performance in the future. As a result, pre-school programs can be very important building blocks for improving urban education.

Expand Pre-School Programs

If one way to extend the time children spend in school is stretching the school year, another is pushing back when school begins. Getting education to children at an early age is likely to cause major improvements in their performance in the future. As a result, pre-school programs can be very important building blocks for improving urban education.

On the national level, lobbying for both increased funding to Head Start and similar programs and for a loosening of their rules so that more academic, and as a result more effective, independent programs can receive funding. On the local level, one approach is simply to start public preschool programs, an approach being tried now in Los Angeles. The effectiveness of this method is not yet clear. Another, less expensive way to proceed is simply to support and encourage private sector pre-schooling efforts. One obvious way would be a tax-credit for pre-school tuition.

Improve the Teacher Certification Process

One of the great challenges facing urban education reformers is ensuring that competent teachers, open to change, fill the schools. The basis for accomplishing that must be clear standards for all teachers, and a demand that they meet them. This means finding appropriate methods of certification that ensure teachers actually know the subject or subjects they are teaching. One of the more rigorous teacher certification tests nationally, implemented in Massachusetts in 1998, resulted in only 41% of teachers passing the first year. This number has steadily improved, but only because a legitimate standard was imposed. Without one, mediocrity and incompetence are likely to flourish.

One of the more rigorous teacher certification tests nationally, implemented in Massachusetts in 1998, resulted in only 41% of teachers passing the first year. This number has steadily improved, but only because a legitimate standard was imposed.

At the same time, however, urban reformers must resist the temptation to base certification on narrow qualifications like a degree from a school of education. These schools are bastions of educational conservatism and produce graduates who tend to be highly resistant to change. Alternative methods of certification that demand competence while promoting innovation are by far the best approach. In this context, an unusual school choice approach may be helpful: encouraging the creation of new education schools that break the current academic consensus. Kaplan, of test preparation fame, is currently considering innovative new education schools. This, and other projects like it, would be a boon to urban schools.

Staying the Course

Any and all of the potential reform measures outlined here can make a difference and improve the lives of today's urban children. To make a fundamental change that will truly resolve the crisis in urban education, however, requires a coherent strategy that blends both choice and accountability. It is true that each can do some good on its own. But a system in which failure is never punished and success rarely even recognized can corrupt even the widest array of options, turning the better choices into mediocrities and the worse choices into disasters. Similarly, the most rigorous accountability system can sometimes find little to truly motivate an entrenched monopoly facing no competitors for its students and the money that will always accompany them.

Even the combination of accountability and choice, put into practice as solid reforms, may not be enough. If the only thing holding those reforms to together is a transitory public sentiment or elected official, the vested interests will eventually bring a return of the status quo. School governance, from this perspective, is of only limited use. Mayoral control may well make reform easier than decentralized school boards, but reform mayors rarely stay very long, and are even more rarely succeeded by other reformers. Regardless of the nominal control of the schools, only a long-term movement for change, based on support from throughout the community, is likely to fix the problems of urban education. An alliance of businesses, community leaders, and reform politicians, dedicated to choice and accountability reforms, is the key to success, and created such a coalition is the most important step towards securing any gains made for America's urban youth.

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